

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

December 9 2009

I'm sorry about any delays in contact, but I've just had a disastrous, four-week, long isolation from the internet. As a result I've failed to identify mushrooms and been slow to get in touch with correspondents trying to order cards, knives or breaks as Christmas presents. My apologies and all I can say is this has hurt me far more than it's upset you.

But let's get back to the mushrooms . . . well, although I am still getting reports of cepes and parasols from correspondents in the South East (and I spotted several shaggy ink caps from the car in Gloucestershire last week), now the frosts are finally here, even dyed-in-the-wool optimists such as myself have to concede the main season must now be signed off.



Parasols, cepes/porcini and shaggy ink caps are now largely things of the past . . .

This is not to say all hope is lost. As any experienced mushroom hunter knows, if you know where to look, there is always an edible mushroom available somewhere (true, it is a challenge to fill a basket in early March, but not impossible). Also, I'd like to point out that even though 21 December is the shortest day, this evening saw the earliest sunset of the year – in other words, spring is on its way!



The dry autumn meant waxcaps had a poor season, but recent rain has prompted a late flush (22/11/09)

But back to reality . . . waxcaps are still up in reasonable numbers. Overlooked by many guides, in this autumn's tasting sessions, they consistently outscored some better-known varieties. These are likely to be coming to the end, however, for although they can cope with more frost than many species, they are really an

autumnal species. Not so the blewits which are positively prompted into action by sub-zero temperatures.



Wood blewits don't always grow near trees – also, note the rough rings in the second picture (22/11/09)

The two main representatives of the *Lepista* family to grow in Britain are the field and wood varieties (*Lepista saeva* and *L. nuda*). As the names suggest, these generally grow in pastures and woodland respectively, but this is by no means always so. My best patch of wood blewits, for example, grows on an open hillside, several hundred yards from the nearest tree.

Actually this is less surprising than one might expect. Most fungi have such particular habitat requirements – symbiotic relationships with trees and plants usually being the trickiest – that they simply cannot be persuaded to grow in 'captivity'. Field blewits are one of the very few wild mushrooms that man has managed to 'tame'. Put another way, they are relatively tolerant and they are grown in limestone caves in the Loire Valley. As a result a few appearing on the posher supermarket shelves. I would not recommend these, however, for not only are they ridiculously expensive, but the domestication process seems to have stripped them of almost all their flavour. In contrast the wild versions are so powerful and aromatic that they are very indigestible and should thus always be cooked.



Field blewits are also known as 'blue legs' or 'pied bleu' (note the stalk in the picture on the left)

The recent rain has also prompted a strong flush of another mushroom. Jew's ear has an unfortunate name and an even more unfortunate appearance, but it is still more than edible and under-rated by most books. True, it has a rubbery texture and tends to spit badly in the pan, but the flavour is reasonable and it is possible to circumnavigate the texture by shredding finely and using in stir fries (the Chinese employ a close relative in many dishes). Antonio Carluccio is another fan. Although those of you who've been on my courses know I am not a great fan of the Italian maestro, I thoroughly enjoyed his recipe for shredded Jew's ear; garlic; shallot; chilli and basil, stir fried in olive oil and then used to 'dress' fresh pasta.



Jew's ear – better than the name and appearance might suggest (25/11/09)

I know from a plethora of e-mailed photos that clouded agaric (*Clitocybe nebularis*) is also up in force. Unfortunately this is not edible – or rather it may be edible but causes gastric upsets in many people so it is best avoided.



Clouded agaric – common but best avoided owing to gastric upsets

Finally, although I have yet to put details on the website (owing to a disastrous broadband failure), I have now fixed next year's breaks:

Elan Valley Hotel

6 - 7 October 21 - 22 October

The Horseshoes Guest House, Rhayader

29 - 30 September 15 - 16 October
25 - 26 October 29 - 30 October

I won't bore you with the other details (see my websites and those of the hotel and guest house). Put simply, the cost is unaltered from this year and I am also doing another break for two groups of four - six based at the Clyn (£250 per person). I can do half-day packages by arrangement. I also have mushroom knives in stock and am still optimistic my new tins of mushroom cards will be ready just before Christmas. So if any of you want to give a fungal gift this year . . .

Daniel Butler

www.fungiforays.co.uk

01597 811168 / 0779 429 4221

P.S. I loathe junk e-mails and would be horrified to think I might be clogging up your systems unnecessarily, so if at any time you want your name taken off, just let me know with a brief - preferably polite - indication that you want to be removed.